

Testimony of
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Broadcasting Board of Governors before the
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Committee on International Relations
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Chairman Rohrabacher, Ranking Member Delahunt, and members of the Subcommittee— Thank you for inviting me here today for this hearing.

Can you imagine if on the day after 9/11 someone had told us that within two and a half years the United States would have a TV network broadcasting in Arabic from Morocco to Iraq to Yemen, that the network would have 20 million weekly viewers, that the majority of its audience would call the news reliable? Can you imagine if someone would have said U.S.-sponsored television would be sent to the Middle East unfiltered and uncensored—and that U.S. policy would be reported truthfully to millions of Arab TV viewers every week?

We would have called all this astonishing.

Today Alhurra Television broadcasts 24 hours a day, seven days a week to viewers all over the Middle East. In a typical week, more than 150 Alhurra journalists around the world produce 40 hours of news, 24 hours of debates and talk shows, 33 hours of current affairs programs, as well as groundbreaking town hall meetings carried live from places like Damascus, Beirut, Cairo, Khartoum—and even from a Palestinian refugee camp in south Lebanon. These town hall meetings feature debates and intelligent discussion on issues few others in the Arab media would dare tackle: freedom and democracy in the Middle East, women's rights in the Arab world, and the challenge of global terrorism.

As one of Alhurra's first supporters—President Bush—himself foresaw, we have to recognize the ultimate truth about the war on terror: “[T]his war will not be won by force of arms alone. We must defeat the terrorists on the battlefield and we must also defeat them in the battle of ideals. In the long run, the only way to achieve lasting peace is to offer a hopeful alternative to the terrorist ideology of hatred and fear by spreading the hope of freedom across the broader Middle East.”

That's why President Bush's White House supported the launch of a new satellite television channel called Alhurra. Chairman Frank Wolf and a bipartisan coalition of Senators and Congressmen kick started the project by adding it to a war-time supplemental. As ever, we had the strong support of Senator Joe Biden, the political father of this Board. In the summer of 2003, we went to work.

I am in a good position to tell the Alhurra story because my role has largely been that of a cheerleader. The real heroes are in the Bush White House and in the House and Senate and my colleagues Norm Pattiz and Mouafac Harb, about whom I'll have more to say later on. They

also deserve our praise for the heralded success of Radio Sawa, our youth-oriented service to the Arab world.

We started with nothing. No building. No equipment. No cables, no lights. No programs, no TelePromTers, no newswires—and no employees. All the while, the anti-American Arab media continued to spew out hatred on a daily basis and distort America's policies and what America stands for. And within months after establishing Alhurra, we were on the air. Even the private sector doesn't work that fast.

We found our home in 27,000 square feet of leased space in an industrial park in Springfield, Virginia. Over the next four and one-half months, electricians and engineers working intensely 24 hours a day laid over 200 miles of wiring connected to 13 broadcast servers and 200 computers and desktop news editing stations, plus ten incoming fiber optic video lines and four news gathering satellites. We installed news studios, control rooms and edit facilities—all in the shell of a building.

Of course, getting Alhurra Television on the air in record time wasn't just about laying miles of wire and installing state-of-the-art-studios and control rooms. It was about creating a new organization from scratch and designing and launching a 24/7 news and information TV channel in the second-most competitive TV market in the world, the Middle East, challenging one of the most powerful TV news channels in the world, Aljazeera. For that, we needed to recruit a staff of highly skilled professionals committed to our mission—good journalists with experience in Arabic-language TV.

And who were these people joining us? Who would leave their homes and their families to move across the Atlantic and work for a new American television channel? During the recruiting interviews, we were fortunate to meet some remarkable and brave journalists. We learned that they were motivated by a chance to practice journalism without being a mouthpiece of any Arab regime. We learned that they felt driven to fulfill Alhurra's mission of freedom and democracy—and freedom of speech.

As Alhurra's structure quickly came together, we saw a sea of Middle Eastern faces—newsmen and newswomen—enthusiastically preparing, midst working carpenters and electricians, to launch the network. Over 75 experienced journalists from 13 countries were recruited and trained; a worldwide news gathering operation was set up in cooperation with Associated Press TV News with correspondents across the Middle East; and news and current affairs staffs were organized to produce hourly newscasts, two one-hour prime-time daily newscasts as well as daily roundtables, talk shows and magazine shows. A Baghdad bureau was established, and staff hired throughout Iraq for Alhurra and Alhurra-Iraq local news coverage.

And that's how in mere months the U.S. opened a new window for Arabic-speaking TV viewers all over the Middle East. A window on the truth. You may have seen the BBC's recent announcement that it's planning to launch a 12-hour Arabic channel—two years from now. In the war on terror, we didn't have the luxury to wait.

A year and a half after Alhurra launched in February 2004, the respected ACNielsen research company conducted the largest single media survey ever done in the Middle East with over 14,000 face-to-face interviews. That survey, along with others done by prominent research firms, documented that Alhurra's weekly adult audience had grown from zero to over 21 million viewers in those countries surveyed to date and there are likely millions more in countries yet to be surveyed which receive Alhurra. For example, weekly viewership of Alhurra among adults in households with a satellite TV stands at 28% in Jordan, 30% in Lebanon, 45% in Iraq, and 46% in urban Syria. And equally important, the vast majority of Alhurra viewers in most countries indicated they consider the news reliable. Alhurra attained these impressive results despite an aggressive campaign against the channel by many who dislike American policy in the Middle East. Mr. Chairman, I must tell you how incredulous I was to read in the Financial Times that there are "doubts over its claimed audience figures." Doubts about figures provided by ACNielsen and other respected research firms? How can we please these people? They are so intent to politically challenge Alhurra that they even take on ACNielsen.

What is the audience seeing? Alhurra introduces to the region ideas of truth and freedom and democracy never before discussed. Alhurra brings to the vast region of the Middle East unprecedented town hall meetings, talk shows, and debates. We are not afraid to present opposing sides. We win merely by providing the forum for conversations about human rights and economics and the role of women in society. We have to continue to foster these conversations, these debates, until they become a part of the lives of the people of this region, until they become part of life in the Islamic world.

During prime time each evening, Alhurra and Alhurra-Iraq feature several one-hour newscasts, including live reports from Washington and the Middle East. They also include in-depth discussion programs such as the one-hour talk show, "Free Hour," as well as high-quality current affairs programs and documentaries—produced by Alhurra or acquired from leading international TV news organizations. In addition to news, Alhurra airs informational programs on a diverse range of topics such as health, technology, sports, and special events designed to appeal to a broad audience. Outside prime time, the two channels broadcast news and news updates twice an hour, interrupting regular programming, as events warrant, to air breaking news, including coverage of major U.S. foreign policy speeches and congressional hearings.

Yes, the Arab street can finally hear what the President, Secretary of State, and Members of Congress are saying—without filter. And real issues and debates can be presented substantively and intelligently—an intellectually vigorous alternative to the tabloid-style, victim-based fare that Arab viewers are constantly exposed to.

This country recently observed the fourth anniversary of 9/11. Alhurra marked it with a two-hour special town hall meeting on terrorism in Arab countries. The prime time town hall meeting brought together students and experts from the Middle East to discuss how terrorism has affected their lives personally, and the impact terrorism has had on different Arab nations politically. And how did our competitors mark the anniversary of 9/11? Aljazeera showed the Michael Moore film "Fahrenheit 9/11."

President Bush said it best last month when he told the National Endowment for Democracy: “The militants are aided, as well, by elements of the Arab news media that incite hatred and anti-Semitism, that feed conspiracy theories and speak of a so-called American ‘war on Islam’ -- with seldom a word about American action to protect Muslims in Afghanistan, and Bosnia, Somalia, Kosovo, Kuwait, and Iraq.”

A recently published Pew Global Attitudes Project survey from Morocco shows a 22-point increase in favorable attitudes toward the United States among Moroccans. Why? The U.S. Ambassador to Morocco notes that the one factor that has changed in U.S.-Morocco relations is that Radio Sawa has become the most popular radio station in that country, “appears to be having a major impact” and “may be making headway in changing perceptions of the U.S. among its Moroccan listeners.”

Allow me to single out two individuals whose contributions should be spotlighted. My colleague on the Broadcasting Board of Governors, Norman Pattiz. Norm Pattiz is a builder. He knows how to get things done. He knows how to push for and build state-of-the-art broadcast operations. And the Middle East Broadcasting Networks’ tireless and dedicated news director, Mouafac Harb, whom I have found to be both an outstanding journalist and an individual dedicated to freedom and democracy.

Which brings us to the present. We have concluded the Herculean task of quickly getting on the air and achieving impressive results. We have begun an active search for a new and highly qualified president, someone with a strong management background. Since the launch has been concluded, we have asked the State Department Inspector General to examine Alhurra’s contracts and procurement procedures. As we have done in the past with our other entity activities, we are also working closely with the GAO, which is reviewing, at the request of the House Committee on Government Reform, Radio Sawa and Alhurra’s effectiveness, accountability, and cost efficiencies.

Neither taxpayers’ interests nor good government practices should be left out of the Alhurra success story. We rushed to get on the air—now we must manage and maintain the program in the most cost-efficient and transparent ways possible. Covering news in time of war is hardly an exact science. We remain proud of the job our people are doing.

I would like to close by recognizing—and I hope you will join me in saluting—the extraordinary hard-working news professionals at Alhurra Television. They carry out its critical mission everyday, often under life-threatening circumstances. We got a stark reminder of that recently in Baghdad, when the explosion at the Palestine Hotel—where Alhurra’s bureau is located—caused considerable damage to the MBN facilities and injured some of our journalists. We lost a great correspondent, Abdul-Hussein Khazal in February 2005, killed just nine days after Iraqis voted in the first multiparty elections in half a century. These professionals gave the people of Iraq debates among candidates—the first televised debate in a democratic election in the history of the Arab world. On election day in Iraq, the people were able to see that, within hours after a bombing at a polling booth, with blood still on the street, people were lined up to vote.

And here's how one Arabic-language newspaper—Al Quds Al Arabi, by no means friendly to the United States—described Alhurra's coverage of the elections in Egypt: "Alhurra television emerged like a black stallion in this satellite competition, since it was able to attract normal viewers and activists alike thanks to its wide range of guests from the opposition who are not fearful of criticizing the Mubarak regime, as well as Mubarak and his family specifically, while viewers showed disinterest in Aljazeera's coverage." The article's headline: "Admiring Alhurra's Egyptian Elections Coverage; Their newscasts have become like family in the Egyptian news environment."

Thank you—we will be happy to answer your questions.